DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 143 305 IR 004 794

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TITLE The Media Specialists in Exceptional Child Research.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the annual conference of the Health Education Media Association (Miami, Florida, April 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiovisual Aids; *Exceptional Children; Exceptional Child Research; *Handicapped Children; *Media Research; *Media Specialists; Media Technology; Research Skills; Research Tools
IDENTIFIERS Health Education Media Association

ABSTRACT

A media specialist must refine and adapt his techniques to specialty areas to be effective in a research program. This article presents guidelines for media program development which are applicable to all media forms. Considerations for the media presentation are: purpose of the research, audience, criteria for inclusion, individual needs of children studied, communication with professional associates, releases and legal access, editing and evaluation of final product. A bibliography of related reference materials is included. (JAB)

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THE MEDIA SPECIALIST IN EXCEPTIONAL CHILD RESEARCH

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Miami, Florida

April 1977

IR 004 794

Paper presented to the Health Education Media Association (HEMA) and the Nursing Education Institute of HEMA Annual Conference

THE MEDIA SPECIALIST IN EXCEPTIONAL CHILD RESEARCH

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Into a field where professionals were once given a short briefing on the loading and operation of a camera, then told to call a phone number if the equipment broke, comes the media specialist in ever growing numbers. He is no longer an auxiliary entity to take pictures and disappear, but an integral member of a research-training team. A media specialist who desires to be a valuable member of a research, training, or service team must refine and adapt his techniques to many specialty areas. It does little good to attempt to communicate in terms of one's abilities in program style, special effects, editing, and technical tricks. Such talk only alienates the media person from those academic professionals whom he is supposed to be helping.

A media person who finds himself in a research, training, or service facility involving exceptional children is in a small but growing branch of the overall field of communications specialists including filmmakers, television producers, directors and editors, photographers, audio specialists, and AV program designers. Quite often this media person wears several hats and is extremely versatile, coming from B.A., M.A., and other degree programs of commercial communications. A major task for the newcomer is the adapting of commercial techniques to the methods and requirements of educational and medical research and training. The practice of giving the talent a script is inappropriate when working in a study designed for data collection and

analysis. For example, expecting a child in a research study to interact "on cue" is unrealistic.

We, therefore, present some simple, logical guidelines for program development applicable to all media forms used by those media specialists working in the field of the exceptional child.

PURPOSE

What is the purpose of the media product? It is for documentation of a testing session or diagnosis? Is it for formal presentation, "in-service" training, or archival storage?

AUDIENCE

Will the users of the product be other professionals, parents, the general public, or the news media? What is their previous understanding of the portrayed subject?

CRITERIA

Prior to the organization of the media product, the media and content people must decide exactly what they want the audience to gain from the production. This knowledge to be gained must be stated in terms of a criterion or behavioral objective. Decide what needs to be presented to elicit those objectives and stick to it.

INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Be sensitive to the needs of the children and parents being recorded, especially if they have difficulty in communication or if the information is particularly sensitive or personal.

INPUT FROM THE "EXPERTS"

Be certain you understand the problem or the need which the content person has determined is important for presentation in the material or program you are producing. Too often media personnel feel that they can "shoot", "tape", or "record" anything that is put in front of them without having to completely understand the other professional's specialized subject areas. Your communication with other professionals must be continuous throughout planning, shooting, recording, printing, and editing. This very important element of comprehending the subject matter before starting to tape or film is perhaps the most overlooked item in the production schedule. Too often the novice producer feels that if he or she "gets lots of footage shot" there will always be enough to "make something out of it." If one shoots without a goal and purpose in mind the resulting show ends up being a compromise or is abandoned due to the "lack of appropriate material." This fallacy is not always the fault of the media person. Many subject matter experts will try to side-step the preparation of an objective and ask the media producer to shoot and shoot and shoot. Try to convince the professional that this is not the most efficient way of attaining a useful product, humble yourself, and put some of the burden of success on the shoulder of the other person.

We have found that an excellent way to "educate" the educator is to rent or preview other people's media products. This has a two-fold purpose. First, it may demonstrate that a product already exists to fill the need and you could spend your time helping to produce other programs of which nothing currently is available. Secondly, and perhaps more important, the non-media professional will experience new techniques which he or she may

wish to incorporate into current or future programs: "A picture is worth a thousand words." Fifteen minutes of fruitless describing can be substituted by a few minutes of experiencing the technique.

RELEASES AND LEGAL ACCESS

Institutions may vary a bit on the wording of releases, but all of them require a release of some sort before beginning a project. The release will assure your organization the right to present the material.

Check the wording of the form you use. If it is your intention to make a program to be held for an indefinite length of time, to be marked, or one that is "irreplaceable", make sure that the consent form gives all encompassing consent for the stated purpose. Since the consent form can be retracted at any time it is necessary to be explicit as to the intended use of the product. For example, if it is to be presented at a specialized conference and also used for graduate educational psychology classes, state this in the form. Specific informed consent is superior to general consent. Prior to acquiring the signature on the consent form establish who will be the custodian of the form, either the content expert or the media specialist. Seek expert legal counsel for the preparation of the consent form to assure that the delicate legal requirements for basic civil and human rights to all individuals are not violated.

TECHNIQUES

Be careful about the way the child may appear on camera, especially if he or she has physical deformities. Remember that the camera-angle, use of a "fish-eye lens," or limited audio frequency response can make mild deficits into grotesque features.

FINISHING TOUCHES

Given budget limitations include graphics, titling, and insertation of another medium (e.g., slides on tape) as needed to help round out the overall program without making such additions seem pretentious. Adding more "artictic" devices doesn't necessarily enhance the reliability or usefulness of the product.

EDITING

The material to be included will depend upon the purpose or objectives of the product, and whether the material is for educational or research purposes. For example, if the goal of the product is to educate the user to a representative sample of behavior the material must include not only the problems or learning deficits the child exhibits, but must also include footage which documents his strengths. If the purpose of the product is to provide examples of aberrant child behavior exclusively and the intent is not to represent his total functioning, this goal must be stated to the audience at the outset.

In a purely research taping or filming it might be best not to edit at all since the elapsed "real-time" of attention span, quickness of fatigue, or other specific areas may play an important part in the study.

EVALUATION

Interim and final evaluations from several diverse sources are fundamental to an accurate and meaningful product. In the review of the product involve subject matter experts who are knowledgeable in the field being documented. The original purpose must be kept in mind when considering any new suggestions or revisions.

There is a tendency among people not directly associated with media or education to feel that it doesn't require much knowledge to do the work. If arbitrary "button pushing" is all that's done, maybe they're right!

Get involved and strive to improve your awareness. Seek out a professional and ask for help in testing, training or therapy of the child. An effective way to interact with a child is during lunchtime, e.g., assist the staff with feeding. Before taping or filming, observe the procedure to be documented even if it is with another child. Plan your strategy in terms of the previous guidelines. This is the best way to earn the respect of others.

Two more elements, respect and sensitivity both in terms of the subject matter personnel and the children or parents must be internalized and operating before the media producer tackles the task of program development. Sensitivity to the child without feeling pity is the most difficult adjustment the media producer must make. There is no substitute for this essential quality!

The media specialist who has the opportunity to work in the areas of the exceptional child and developmental disabilities is extremely fortunate. He must, in turn, commit himself to his organization's goals, to professional standards, and to the realization that all children are entitled to their basic rights regardless of their handicapping condition.

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